Censorship during Napoleon's Exile on St. Helena

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The enigma that was Napoleon has fascinated scholar and layman alike ever since his death on St. Helena in 1821.(Figure 1)



Figure 1

After briefly examining the events that led to his exile on St. Helena and the political climate that demanded his removal to so distant a place, this talk will examine the censorship of the exiles' mail, why it was done, and how the exiles circumvented it.

Sir Hudson Lowe, having shown himself to be a capable administrator during the Napoleonic Wars, was appointed governor of St. Helena during Napoleon's exile. He was conscientious but unimaginative and, overwhelmed by his charge to prevent Napoleon's escape, tended to adhere too strictly to his instructions. He and Napoleon met only six times and thereafter engaged in a propaganda war which Napoleon "won."

The Hudson Lowe papers have reposed in the British Library for more than 130 years and have been thoroughly examined by scholars. That censorship was practiced is well documented but virtually no physical evidence of it was known until twenty years ago, when the papers of General Henri Bertrand, Napoleon's Grand Marshal, through whom all Napoleon's communication with the outside world passed, became available for study. Many relevant documents were found and have been carefully collated with those among the Lowe papers. Bertrand meticulously maintained a full dossier of all communications he had with Hudson Lowe and others. Thus have come to light the first recorded

examples of material actually to have passed through the censorship system. Three categories of censorable material will be considered: letters (local and overseas), books, and newspapers.

After Napoleon's escape from his first exile on Elba, the Allies were not about to permit his return to power; Europe was petrified lest he continue his wars as he had since 1796. So he must have known when he presented himself to Capt. Frederick Maitland, commander of the *Bellerophon*, that he stood a good chance of being exiled somewhere. He tried to appeal to British generosity and hospitality in seeking refuge and residence in England.

Napoleon began his last journey, on July 15, 1815, boarding the *Bellerophon* at Rochefort, anchoring at Torbay on the 24th and Plymouth on the 31st, where Admiral Keith and Sir Henry Bunbury informed Napoleon of their Government's decision to send him to St. Helena. Despite his protests concerning the legality of that decision, he was removed to the *Northumberland*, commanded by Admiral George Cockburn, and set sail for the island on August 7, arriving on October 15.

An ideally isolated place, St. Helena (Figure 2) lies approximately 1200 miles off the African coast in the South Atlantic and 700 miles from the nearest land, Ascension Island. It had been a principal provisioning stop on the homeward-bound trip from India and the Cape, governed by the East India Company under charter from the Crown since 1661. Control was returned to the Crown during the Exile.



Figure 2

Because of the significant maritime activity, strict regulations were required to ensure that Napoleon remained in custody since escape by sea was not impossible.

At the time of Napoleon's arrival, Col. Mark Wilks was governor of St. Helena. Admiral Cockburn, however, was responsible for Napoleon's custody until the new governor, Sir Hudson Lowe, arrived on April 14, 1816 and combined the two responsibilities. Napoleon's residence during his exile was at Longwood. (Figure 3.)

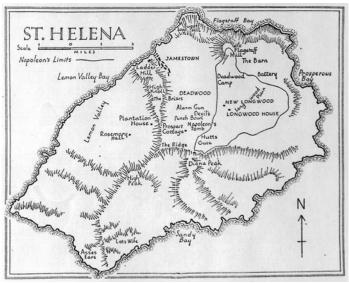


Figure 3

The Regulations under which Cockburn operated had been devised by the War & Colonial Office in London, dated 30 July 1815, and were codified by an Act (56 Geo. 3, cap. 23, promulgated April 11, 1816) (Figure 4)

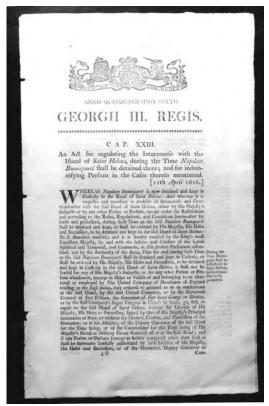


Figure 4

These underwent two major revisions during Lowe's tenure, in October 1816 and again in October 1817.

Briefly, the 1815 Regulations required that all the exiles' correspondence be sent unsealed so that local mail could be read by the governor and that mail to or from overseas could be read by the governor *and* the Colonial Office in London. Anything the exiles addressed to the British Government was to be forwarded to London by the governor **after** he had made any comments he deemed appropriate. Private mail to friends and family could be forwarded at the governor's discretion. The 1816 changes had to do with assuring that, on St. Helena, *only* the governor would be aware of the contents of correspondence to or from the exiles (Figure 5).

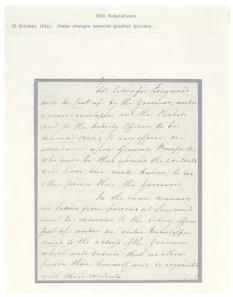


Figure 5

The 1817 alterations gave more specific instructions regarding the treatment of intraisland letters (Figure 6).



Figure 6

The philosophy of the British Government is clearly stated in a letter (Figure 7) from Lord Bathurst, Secretary for War & the Colonies, to Hudson Lowe on January 1, 1818 in which he said:

... permission to send and receive sealed letters, whether under colour of private business, or under any other pretence, is incompatible with the situation of a Prisoner of War, and is liable to the greatest objections, as such a relaxation of the existing rules would, in effect, be to abandon one of the best securities against a successful attempt at escape. ii

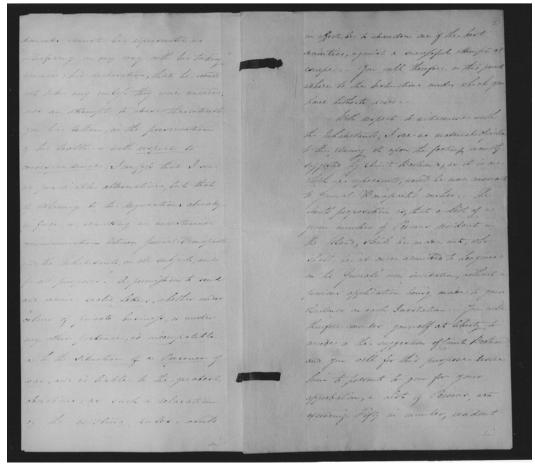


Figure 7

Thus, the stated purpose of censoring Napoleon's correspondence was to prevent his escape. Rumors were rife concerning various plans to aid Napoleon to escape, some to the U.S., another to Brazil. Concern was so great that in July 1816 Bathurst wrote to Lowe saying that if Lowe thought there was a secret correspondence being carried on concerning escape plans, he could search Napoleon's quarters and those of his entourage. There is no evidence that Lowe ever did so.

Censorship would also prevent Napoleon from conspiring to interfere in Continental politics. It would prevent "circulating unfounded calumnies against the British Government." And, as foreseen in the 1815 Regulations, it would permit Hudson Lowe to defend himself when complaints were made about the execution of his duties. . . and such complaints were numerous.

Unfortunately for Lowe, an active traffic in clandestine correspondence permitted dissemination in England of (often unfounded) complaints before he could defend himself. There was bound to be conflict between Napoleon and whoever his guardian was but because of the great animosity between Lowe and Napoleon, there was a steady narrowing and tightening of the interpretation of the Regulations.

Having described the rationale for censorship and the Regulations drawn up regarding

it, we can now look at how, in fact, the censorship system worked.

The clearest demonstrations of how incoming letters were treated are found among the letters sent to Bertrand by Count Emmanuel de Las Cases. Las Cases originally accompanied Napoleon to St. Helena but was expelled, in December 1816, by Lowe when he was caught trying to smuggle a letter to England. He left the Island with a mission: to obtain the help of powerful Europeans in ending Napoleon's exile. Some say he "arranged" to be deported. He wrote of his progress (or lack thereof) to Bertrand in a series of 14 letters sent monthly between January 1818 and April 1819.

Because Bertrand was the ultimate recipient of these letters, and because he saved everything, it is possible to trace the passage of one of the letters through the system. The first Las Cases letter was written at Frankfort on January 15, 1818 (Figure 8).

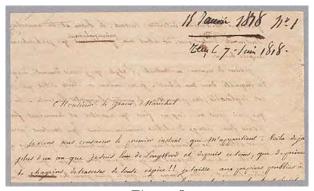


Figure 8

He sent it to the Colonial Office in London where Henry Goulburn, Undersecretary for War & the Colonies and the man responsible for the mechanics of the censorship in London, read it (Figure 9). Goulburn forwarded Las Cases' letter to Lowe, with a cover letter dated 14 February referring to its contents which he had discussed with Lord Bathurst:

Among the letters forwarded to you by the present opportunity, is one from Count Las Cases to Count Bertrand, the object of which is to procure General Bonaparte's permission for the publication in Europe of the Campaigns of Italy. If General Bonaparte feels no objection to trusting this work to Count Las Cases, Lord Bathurst has no wish to prevent his doing so. vi



Lowe apparently sent Las Cases' letter to Bertrand immediately, since it is docketed as having been received on June 7 (Figure 10). Three days later, Lowe sent a copy of Goulburn's letter, and, in the last paragraph of his own cover letter of June 10, showed his awareness of the contents of Las Cases' letter:

The Governor has the honor to enclose for the information of Napoleon Bonaparte a copy of a letter he has received from Mr. Goulburn...in reference to a subject on which Count Bertrand has been addressed in the last letter forwarded to him from Count Las Cases.^{vii}

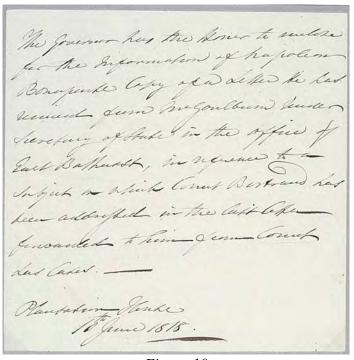


Figure 10

This chain is a clear demonstration that the system worked as required by the 1815 Regulations, i.e. incoming mail read both in London and St. Helena.

On the reverse of Las Cases' eleventh letter (Figure 11), from Mannheim, January 15, 1819, is even more graphic proof. It is a handwritten docket as follows:

This letter was accidentally tom at this office in opening the envelope.

Henry Goulbum

Colonial Office Feby 25th 1819



Figure 11

No examples of outgoing mail that passed through this system have been reported but evidence that it received the same treatment can be found in a July 27, 1817 letter to Bertrand from Hudson Lowe (Figure 12):

The letter you have addressed to me for Count Las Cases will be forwarded to him. I am sensible of the attention evinced in it, to satisfy the Count that the delay in acknowledging his letter to you and the articles he forwarded, has not sprung [sic] with me.

I cannot however in future take upon myself to admit of any communication between Count Las Cases and Longwood, except such as may pass through the Channel of Government. . . $^{\text{viii}}$

Little Samer From Some for have fully to the same for Court day Care the said be forwarded to have a day in the satisfy the Court has be delay in acknowledging his letter to you and the article be forwarded, has not ofward, with me.

Figure 12

Clearly, Lowe read the letter Bertrand had written to Las Cases. Of particular interest is that Lowe is now insisting that all communication "pass through the Channel of Government," implying that he had bypassed London in the past. Presumably, Lowe was responding to the worsening relations between himself and Napoleon and was beginning to interpret his instructions more strictly. ix

Evidence that intra-island communications were handled according to Regulations is derived from two letters among the Bertrand papers. The first is from Lowe (July 1, 1816):

A sealed letter was presented to me this morning by Mr. Porteous which he said had been given to him at your house with a request to deliver it to the person to whom it was addressed. I have desired him to return it unopened and acquainted him at the same time of the error he had committed in taking charge of it... x

The second is from his Adjutant, Sir Thomas Reade (April 14, 1818):

I am directed by his Excellency the Governor to return you the enclosed letter which was brought by one of your servants to Mr. Ibbetson who through inadvertency, as he says, broke the seal of it without reflecting at the moment that it did not come conveyed to him in the channel which the regulations prescribe....xi

In both cases Bertrand attempted to bypass Lowe and have the letters delivered directly. In both cases, the infraction was reported and the letters returned. Penalties for aiding improper communications were heavy. xii

Concerning books, the Regulations say nothing specific. There is Admiral Malcolm's plain statement of July 25, 1816, cited in his wife's *Diary*, ^{xiii} that Napoleon could have any books he wanted. In the Lowe papers, ^{xiv} Bathurst made clear statements that Napoleon could have any books he wanted as long as they passed through his office (Figure 13). A copy of a letter from Henry Bunbury, another Undersecretary to Lord Bathurst, to Lowe, sent with a covering letter from Lowe to Bertrand, confirms this method of delivery:

War & Colonial Dept 6 March 1816

Sir

I am directed by Earl Bathurst to acquaint you that twenty packages containing books for the use of General Bonaparte. . .have been this day forwarded to Portsmouth in order that they may be embarked on board His Majesty's Ship Newcastle which is about to proceed to the Island of St. Helena.

(signed) Henry Bunbury^{xv}

Sir Hudson Lowe presents his compts to Count Bertrand and transmits him some letters just received from England, and also the extract of a letter he has himself received from the Undersecretary of State respecting the books which were written for to England. . . . x^{vi}

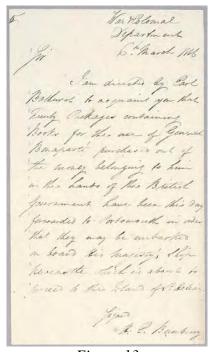


Figure 13

At times, Goulbum would forward boxes to St. Helena without inspection but with covering letters to Lowe advising him to inspect them.

Similarly, no attempt was made to keep newspapers, telling of events in Europe, from Napoleon since there was little chance he could influence affairs there again. This was stated by Balmain^{xvii} (August 27, 1816) and Malcolm^{xviii} (July 25, 1816 and March 7, 1817).

There was an exchange of notes on this subject between Bertrand and Capt. Nicolls, Orderly Officer at Longwood, on August 28, 1819. Bertrand complained about not receiving current newspapers (Figure 14). Nicolls replied:

Napoleon Bonaparte has had sent to him all the papers that have come to his address, also those of the latest date which the Governor has received. The Governor has not seen, nor does he believe there is on the Island, any Morning Chronicle of the month of May. . . xix



Figure 14

In fact, Lowe often sent newspapers to Longwood that he thought would interest Napoleon:

18 July 1816

Sir Hudson Lowe presents his compts to Count Bertrand and sends him some of the last papers arrived. . . xx

16 October 1817

The Governor has just received some later papers from the surgeon of the vessel bound to New South Wales which he loses no time in transmitting to Longwood, begging at the request of the person from whom they have been received, they may be returned as soon as perused. **xi

What were the consequences of the censorship? The direct consequence was that Napoleon refused to write. This is well documented. Las Cases, in a letter to Lucien Bonaparte (September 1816), noted that Napoleon was upset that others read his personal letters from his family. He would rather receive no more letters than receive them on these terms. Upon being told his letters must be sent unsealed or else be opened, In these circumstances the Emperor deems it advisable to renounce letter writing.

Thus, when the British Government decided to reduce its expenditure for the

Longwood establishment (July 1816), Napoleon offered to pay his own way *if* he were permitted to write a sealed letter to his bankers. Bathurst wrote to Lowe saying the latter *might* permit Napoleon *one* sealed letter to the Mercantile House in London for the purpose of arranging financial matters, if Lowe thought it advisable. But Lowe did not permit it (an error in judgment) and, so, as much to embarrass Lowe and the British as anything else, Napoleon had much of his silver plate broken up and sold for scrap. It was a grand gesture, fiscally unnecessary but politically brilliant. An account of the sale, apparently smuggled out, appeared in *L'Antigallican*, early 1817, and created much sympathy for Napoleon. The only known extant letter (Figure 15) signed by Napoleon during his final exile was written at this time and deals with the distribution of the funds arising from this sale.

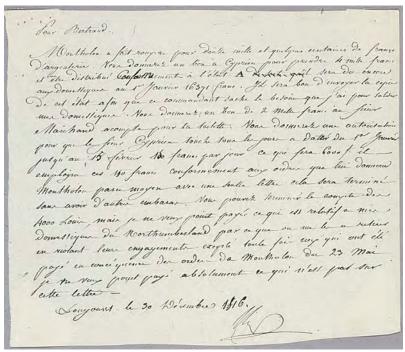


Figure 15

Sir Walter Scott predicted^{xxvii} that the attempt at censorship would fail because the severity of the Regulations would be bound to engender a certain amount of sympathy that would help create an active market for trafficking in clandestine correspondence. Las Cases, in a letter to Lord Bathurst from Frankfort (December 1817), referring to his deportation for smuggling, said ". . . (I) availed myself of the right of any captive, that of deceiving. . . his gaoler. . . ."xxviii The literature of the Exile is replete with accounts of smuggling. Xxix It is well known to us and was well known to the British at the time, as they watched one smuggled dispatch after another being published in the popular press. The arrest and deportation of Las Cases is merely the most famous incident.

From another source comes a contemporary account of Las Cases' arrest, written by Dr. George Dunlop, surgeon to the 66th Regiment guarding Napoleon (Figure 16). Despite several errors of fact, it is an interesting document:

. . . Napoleon still continues to spend his days in complete retirement. It would appear, however, that he has not been idle. A short time ago, a secret correspondence was discovered, the nature of which is not known. His secretary, Las Cases, had a...boy in his service whom he was sending to England.... By some accident, the father of the boy found sewn between the lining of his jacket two pieces of white silk on which there was a great deal of writing. He immediately made the plot known and the writer has since been confined. He is to be sent to the Cape. . . xxx

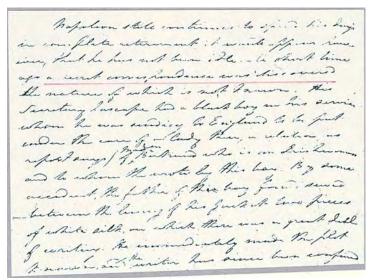


Figure 16

From the Bertrand archive comes the only extant example of a smuggled document (Figure 17), the tiny handwriting meticulously done by Etienne St. Denis, Napoleon's second valet. This sample contains the famous "Declaration" of Napoleon (August 16, 1819) which was published by Antommarchi in his *Memoirs*, xxxi among other places.



Figure 17

Other methods of getting messages off the Island were used besides smuggling. Several articles written in code appeared in various newspapers, the most famous being the so-called *L'Antigallican* affair, alluded to above. Similar undertakings were reported to have occurred in the *Morning Chronicle* and the *Times*, papers of a Bonapartist hue.

Illustrated here (Figure 18) is an overlay cypher "found among the papers of Napoleon" (as docketed in the upper left comer). It could be used for four different codes, being asymmetric and numbered in the corners "1" and "2" on one side, "3" and

"4" on the other. The cypher begins toward the middle of the page and follows the arrows. Unfortunately, no example of a letter written using the cypher is known, but why have it if it wasn't used? A hint that it might have been used occurs in a letter from Goulbum to Bathurst (August 4, 1820) in which he notes Hudson Lowe's complaint about having to read immensely long letters of "exquisite **in**sensibility." Might not that have been the necessary disguise for a letter requiring an overlay cypher?

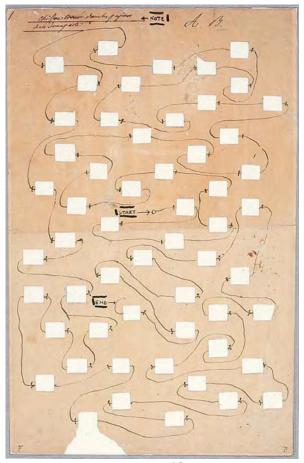


Figure 18

The most audacious method, and successful only once, was Bertrand's "disingenuous conduct" surrounding the dispatch of Napoleon's famous "Observations" on a speech by Lord Bathurst. The story is a fascinating one, worthy of examination in this new context, for it shows how well the French read Lowe's character and how they played upon his view of honorable behavior.

In March 1817, Lord Bathurst made a speech in Parliament defending the treatment of Napoleon while the responsibility of his Office. The speech was reported in the *Morning Chronicle*. Napoleon read the report. He constructed his rebuttal over a period of time and it was finally ready in October. He sent it to Lowe on October 7 in a *sealed* envelope addressed to Lord Liverpool, the Prime Minister.

Lowe, on the 21st, wrote to Bertrand saying that it was against Regulations for him to

send a sealed letter to London, the reason being that he, Lowe, had to make whatever comments he deemed necessary before Napoleon's complaints or charges could be placed before the Prince Regent. In that way, the Prince Regent would have the benefit of both sides of the story before rendering an opinion. (See 1815 Regulations, Sec. 17.) Without such comments from Lowe, Napoleon's communication would be sent back unread to St. Helena, resulting in considerable delay in the hearing of his case. So Lowe asked Bertrand if there were anything in that sealed letter requiring his comment. *xxxiiii*

On the 27th, Bertrand wrote back saying:

...Yours of the 21st of this month relates to the letter I sent you on the 7th of October for Lord Liverpool; that letter has now been in your hands twenty days; it is the property of your Prime Minister. **xxxiv**

He was stonewalling. Hudson Lowe replied to Bertrand, on the same day, that in the absence of a response to his question, he was sending the letter to England unopened. And so, on the 30th, he sent the still sealed letter to Bathurst with a cover letter in which he apologized for sending it unopened but he felt that "delicacy" required it even though he was certain it contained complaints against him. **xxxvi**

It did, indeed. In a letter to Lowe dated January 1, 1818 (Figure 19), Bathurst chastised Lowe for allowing Bertrand's "disingenuous" behavior to alter procedure:

Downing Street 1 January 1818

Sir

I have received and forwarded to the Earl of Liverpool, the sealed packet enclosed in your despatch, which professes to contain the observations of General Bonaparte, upon certain extracts from a report which appeared in the Morning Chronicle, of a speech which I had occasion to deliver in the House of Lords, upon the subject of his treatment at St. Helena.

Although Count Bertrand's conduct gave you fair reason to infer, that the packet contained nothing upon which it could be necessary to require your observations or reply, and thereby induced you so far to deviate from your instructions as to transmit it unopened; yet, as it is found on perusal to contain a general complaint of your treatment of General Bonaparte, not only from the time of your arrival at St. Helena to the latest period to which anything I said could have referred, but continued by a note at the close of it, up to the very day on which it was delivered to you, I consider it my duty, previous to my laying it before the Prince Regent, to transmit to you a copy by the first opportunity.

Had the General addressed the packet to you unsealed, as the regulations (he knew) required, for the purpose of being transmitted home, I should by this time most probably have been enabled to lay the charges and your answer, fully before the Prince Regent. The delay which must now take place, has

been altogether occasioned by the disingenuous conduct which has been practiced upon you; and although it is difficult to understand what advantage General Bonaparte could have expected to derive from it, if his object had been the fair investigation of his case, it will I am sure in the event of any other sealed letters being sent to you for transmission, prove to you, the expediency of not permitting any feeling of delicacy, to interfere with the strict execution of your instructions. xxxvii

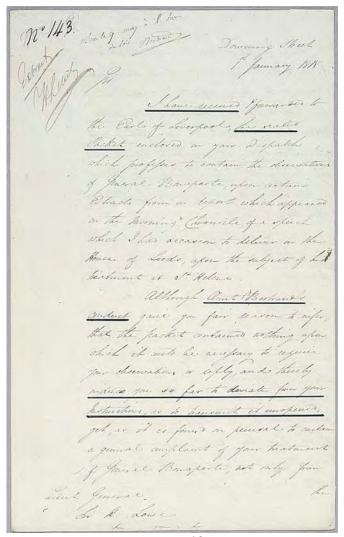


Figure 19

In a personal note, sent with the above official letter, Bathurst sympathized with Lowe's difficult position. In April, Bathurst wrote that Napoleon's "Observations" had made little stir at home. **xxxviii*

Lowe never again permitted himself to be fooled in such a manner. He had asked Bertrand, as a gentleman, whether there was anything he needed to comment on. He sensed that there was but his code required him to assume that no response meant no comment was needed.

In summary, the British sought to prevent Napoleon's escape from St. Helena not only with a large military garrison but also by censoring his communications. It is not at all certain that Napoleon ever seriously entertained the notion of escape so the extent to which censorship helped prevent it is moot. The Regulations and their application led to considerable conflict between the residents of Longwood and the British and to a neverending propaganda war. It materially helped Napoleon to build his Legend and popular acceptance of his (allegedly) poor treatment. The system demonstrably worked as set forth in the Regulations. The exiles successfully circumvented the censorship by smuggling, sending coded messages, using overlay cyphers (probably), and by deceit. That it was necessary to institute some form of censorship is generally agreed; that it was doomed to failure was inevitable.

Endnotes:

i A.M. 20200, ff. 21-4. All references to material cited from the Lowe papers in the British Library are annotated: Additional Manuscripts (A.M.), Volume (20200), page # (ff. 21-4). The Regulations have all been reprinted in Forsyth (see note 33 below): the 1815 Regulations in Vol. I, pp. 5-19; the 1816 ones in the same volume, pp. 466-473; the 1817 ones in Vol. II, pp. 216-218.

ⁱⁱ A.M. 20200, ff. 133-8.

iii A.M. 20201, ff. 102-4.

iv A.M. 20199, f. 126.

^v A.M. 20200, ff. 21-4.

vi A.M. 20201, ff. 95-6.

vii Bertrand papers, unpublished, #157. Bertrand's heirs dispersed his papers in the 1970's. Many of those referred to were in the author's collection.

viii Bertrand papers, unpublished, unnumbered.

ix A.M. 20199, ff. 206-7.

^x Bertrand papers, unpublished, #8.

ari Bertrand papers, unpublished, unnumbered.

xii A.M. 20153, ff. 26-7: Hudson Lowe's *Proclamation* of June 28, 1816.

xiii Lady Malcolm, *A Diary of St. Helena, 1816-7*, ed. Sir Arthur Wilson, (London: A.D. Innes & Co., Ltd., 1899), p. 40.

xiv A.M. 20200, ff. 49-50 and A.M. 20202, f. 216, among others.

^{xv} A.M. 20199, f. 75.

xvi Bertrand papers, unpublished, #15, dated May 29, 1816.

xvii Count Balmain, *Reports*, in *Napoleon in Captivity*, tr. & ed. by Julia Park (Freeport, N.Y.: Books for Libraries Press, 1971), pp. 54-5.

xviii Lady Malcolm, op. cit,, p. 35 & p. 111.

xix Bertrand papers, unpublished, unnumbered, dated August 28, 1819.

xx Bertrand papers, unpublished, unnumbered, dated June 18, 1816.

xxi Bertrand papers, unpublished, unnumbered, dated October 16, 1817.

xxii Balmain, op. cit., p. 97. Also. Gilbert Martineau, Napoleon's St. Helena, tr.

FrancisPartridge (London: John Murray, 1968), p. 53, among others.

xxiii Count Emmanuel de las Cases, *Memoirs*, (London: Henry Colburn, 1818), 2nd ed., pp. 157-8.

xxiv *Ibid.*, p. 158.

xxv A.M. 20199, f. 153.

xxvi A.M. 20199, ff. 193-5.

^{xxvii} Quoted in R.C. Seaton, *Napoleon's Captivity in Relation to Sir Hudson Lowe*, (London: George Bell & Sons, 1903), p. 165.

xxviii Las Cases, op. cit., p. 173.

E.g. Baron Gourgard, *The St. Helena Journal*, tr. Sidney Gillard, (London: John Lane The Bodley Head Ltd., 1932), p. 18; E.L. Jackson, *St. Helena: The Historic Island*, (London: Ward Lock & Co., Ltd., 1903), p. 169; Lord

Rosebury, *Napoleon: The Last Phase*, (London: Arthur L. Humphries, 1900), p. 162.

xxx F. Antommarchi, *Memoirs of the Last Two Years of Napoleon's Exile*, (London: Henry Colburn, 1826), 2 Vols., Vol. 2, p. 280; Also in Barry E. O'Meara, *Napoleon in Exile: or, A Voice from St. Helena*, (New York, W.J. Widdleton, 1862), 2 Vols., Vol. 2, pp. 302-3.

xxxi Letter dated December 20, 1816 addressed to Dr. Dunlop's father in Scotland.

xxxii Earl Bathurst, Report on the Manuscripts of Earl Bathurst Preserved at

Cirencester Park, (London: His Majestoy's Stationery Office, 1923), p. 484.

xxxiii William Forsyth, *History of the Captivity of Napoleon*, (London: John Murray, 1853) in 3 Vols., Vol 2., p. 442.

xxxiv *Ibid.*, Vol. 2, p. 220.

xxxv A.M. 20200, ff. 21-3; also Forsyth, op.cit., Vol. 2, pp. 213-4.

xxxvi Forsyth, op. cit., Vol. 2, p. 462.

xxxvii A.M. 20200, ff. 151-3.

xxxviii A.M. 20201, ff. 4-8.